

False advertising

America's Sweethearts, directed by Joe Roth, written by Billy Crystal and Peter Tolan

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Billy Crystal makes me laugh. *When Harry Met Sally* was one of the funniest films I've seen. Enticed by the promise of a comedy that lambastes Hollywood excesses, produced by and featuring Crystal, I was anticipating a well-spent mini-fortune at the local multiplex. I left disappointed, realizing how unlikely it would be for a truly biting, satirical film about Hollywood to open in multiple theaters in the most ubiquitous movie theater chain around.

Perhaps the intent of the producer Crystal and director Joe Roth was to allow some of Hollywood's biggest stars (Julia Roberts, Catherine Zeta-Jones, John Cusack and Crystal) to show us a glimpse of the hypocrisy of their trade, to let us know that they resent being idolized as stars rather than appreciated for their abilities in their field. This is a worthy endeavor, but unfortunately, the humor used to relate the message here is more slapstick than satire, the story more romance than critique, so this reviewer, at least, was dissatisfied.

The "sweethearts" in question, John Cusack as Eddie Thomas and Catherine Zeta-Jones as Gwen Harrison, are an estranged movie star couple whose careers have faltered after their off-screen breakup. Starring together in a string of grade B romance adventures, the couple had become the hottest item in Hollywood. Their last picture together, the much anticipated *Time Over Time*, is still in the hands of eccentric director Hal Weidemann (Christopher Walken), who is editing the final cut in the Unibomber's cabin which has been relocated to his estate. The studio needs the picture to make money, and the stars need the picture to resuscitate their careers.

After firing his top publicist Lee Phillips (Crystal),

the studio boss (Stanley Tucci) brings Phillips back to preside over a lavish junket. A veteran schmoozer and manipulator, Phillips is the only one who can rescue what could be a financial disaster for the studio. The assembled journalists will be expecting the new film, but in case the director fails to show up with it, the publicist is assigned to divert them. Such junkets—at which the media are showered with gifts and attention, presumably in exchange for favorable reviews—are a common practice in the American film industry. Phillips is to mastermind a fake reconciliation of the ex-couple in order to generate box office interest. The assembled press corps dutifully demonstrate their devotion to some good, hot gossip.

The film revolves around Eddie's torment over being dumped by Gwen. But the characters are so artificial that it is difficult to conceive of their even having a "real life." Eddie is a nice guy, so we can't imagine why he is so devoted to Gwen, a vain and egocentric diva. There is too little with which to empathize, and the opportunities to generate any strong feelings for or against the characters and what they represent are frittered away by director Joe Roth (notably of *Revenge of the Nerds*). In the end, Eddie realizes that he has really fallen for Kiki (Julia Roberts) the awkward, supposedly plain, formerly overweight, self-abnegating sister and assistant of the glamorous mega-star.

An interesting scene that seems somewhat honest and revealing takes place near the end of the film, when the eccentric director arrives at the eleventh hour with his edited work. He has dropped the film the studio set out to produce and has made the film that he feels is important—a documentary secretly shot during the filming of the feature picture, exposing the bitter and

hypocritical relationships that develop behind the scenes. The unauthorized film is a hit with the press, reinforcing their status as gossip junkies, and gratifying all involved. Unfortunately, this aspect of *America's Sweethearts* seems less important to the filmmakers than the romance that develops between Eddie and Kiki. It is an interesting and complex scene, but is almost lost on the audience, taking place at the end of a tedious romantic sequence.

I found the characters too shallow and so exaggerated that they became cartoonish rather than comic. Crude slapstick overcomes any subtlety (for example, Phillips, the publicist, in attempting to save Eddie from jumping off a roof, flings open a door, knocking into Eddie, sending him flying to the edge while the studio head mumbles "jump, jump."). The satirical moment is lost in the buffoonery. There are endless jokes about penis size, and the musical soundtrack is almost cloned from *Home Alone*. Possibly this is deliberate, intended as a comment on the well-known blockbuster films, but since *America's Sweethearts* uses some of the same gags, the music just becomes part of the lower-level humor.

America's Sweethearts is advertised as a film that dares to take on Hollywood. It purports to skewer the Hollywood milieu of prima donna actresses, avaricious studio moguls and sycophantic reporters. But the weapons are too blunt so no one is scratched.

Most of the performances are good, and the film has some funny moments. Alan Arkin, portraying a guru nurturing Eddie back to mental health at an exclusive retreat, is very funny. As Phillips whisks Eddie off, Arkin makes sure his luxury automobile will be delivered the following week. This is one of several excellent scenes which provide a keen insight into the atmosphere of greed and duplicity that permeates Hollywood's upper echelon. If the humor and plot had remained on this level the film would have succeeded.

A stinging satire about Hollywood would be most welcome and refreshing, but this is not it. *Wag the Dog*, which satirized both Hollywood and Washington, was more successful. This film tosses limp barbs at show business, but serves instead a very run-of-the-mill and predictable romantic comedy. The chosen formula is quite safe: big stars, a happy Hollywood ending, and the passive acknowledgment of corruption and deception in Hollywood (as though we never knew).



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